The Atlantic Monthly | July/August 2006

PURSUITS & RETREATS

COMMERCE AND CULTURE

THE NEXT STARBUCKS?

How massage went from the strip club to the strip mall

BY VIRGINIA POSTREL

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When you step off a plane in Indianapolis, one of the first things you see—right next to the directions to baggage claim and ground transport—is a sign advertising massages, from the fifteen-minute "Fast Track" for $18 to the half-hour "Extended Stay" for $33. Travelers can find similar services at airports in Providence, Anchorage, Cedar Rapids, and Baltimore. The Seattle-based Massage Bar has expanded from Sea-Tac to airports serving Nashville, Newark, and Washington, D.C.

And you don't have to go to the airport. Car washes in Dallas and Austin offer chair massages while you wait. Tired shoppers can get them at the Fashion Show mall on the Vegas Strip, at Whole Foods Markets, and at many large bookstores. Massage breaks are regular features at business conventions and sporting events. `

Once a specialized therapy for injured athletes, an indulgence for the idle rich, or a cover for prostitution, massage has become a legitimate and seemingly ubiquitous enterprise. Between August 2004 and July 2005, about 47 million American adults got at least one massage, up 2 million from the previous year, according to the American Massage Therapy Association's annual consumer survey.

Nationally, massage revenue is variously estimated at $6 billion to $11 billion a year. The AMTA estimates that there are between 230,000 and 280,000 massage therapists practicing in the United States, up from between 160,000 and 200,000 in 2000. Massage is one answer to the question, Where will new jobs come from?

It's also the sort of growth industry that doesn't count for much in our public debates about the economy. It's new but not high tech. It's flourishing but fairly small, with annual revenues about the same as Enterprise Rent-A-Car, the snack-chips business, or Hollywood's domestic box office.

The massage industry's product is invisible, less "real" than a hamburger or a video game. It doesn't contribute to national power or prestige the way semiconductors or aircraft do. It doesn't create

world-famous stars like sports or the movies. Its establishments are small, often run by a single individual, and most of its practitioners lack a college education. It is literally touchy-feely.

When Americans think about the economy, we tend to focus on familiar, "serious" businesses—computers or autos or high finance. We don't notice Starbucks until there's one on every corner, changing not only what we drink but also how we live and work. Massage may not be the biggest new industry or the most influential, but it's a microcosm of how commerce and culture interact. The same creativity and resilience that built the industries of the past, and the ways of life that evolved with them, are still at work, spinning out new enterprises serving new values.

As a business, massage has two basic problems. The first is that prostitution is generally illegal. A brothel can't openly advertise its services: no "Madame Julia's House of Great Sex." Instead, Madame Julia pretends she runs a "massage parlor," which creates confusion, and sometimes legal obstacles, for people who want to buy and sell back rubs.

The second problem is that most potential customers consider massage a luxury—an optional indulgence, if not a slightly shameful extravagance. So they're acutely sensitive to price. A massage business can't pass high labor costs along to consumers without suffering a rapid drop in sales.

One way to attack these problems is to declare massage a medical service. Hence in 1983 the American Massage & Therapy Association dropped its ampersand to create a new profession: "massage therapy." Customers and legal authorities can be pretty sure—though not 100 percent certain—that a massage *therapist* isn't selling sex. A therapist not only will keep the client discreetly draped with a sheet but also will take a reassuringly clinical approach to kneading naked flesh. A *masseuse*, on the other hand, may well be a hooker in a skimpy disguise.

Calling massage a "therapy" also suggests that it's good for you, which means you don't have to feel guilty about spending money on it. You might even be able to pass the bill on to your insurance company (only rarely, so far). Massage therapists understandably want their clients to think of massage as a necessity. "At one point in my career I had to defend massage against the 'prostitution attitude,'" says Brenda L. Griffith, a massage therapist in Richmond, Virginia, who has been practicing since 1988. "Now I have to defend massage against the 'pampering attitude.'" Many of her clients do, in fact, have chronic ailments for which massage offers some relief.

But relentlessly touting the healing power of touch makes too many massage therapists sound like quacks. The medical strategy also treats clients as patients, eliminating potential customers who feel healthy. It attracts clients by turning everyday life into a disease. Who, after all, doesn't suffer from stress? Like graphic and industrial designers who refuse to talk about aesthetics, massage therapists seem embarrassed to say they make people feel good.

As something of a massage addict, I don't buy the medical line, and I don't think it's necessary. Assuming it's not too vigorous, a massage not only feels good but also helps me think. It's relaxing, but not so relaxing that I fall asleep. Like a nice glass of wine with dinner or an all-white Heavenly Bed in a hotel room, a massage break adds a little pleasure to everyday life. Even if the massage does nothing for my health, I consider the money well spent.

Humans are sensory beings. Massage doesn't need to justify pleasing our muscles and skin any more than music has to justify pleasing our ears. Chefs don't have to call themselves "nutritional therapists." Hairstylists don't have to pretend that gray hair is a disease. Enjoyment is a perfectly fine

reason to get a massage.

So I was relieved to meet David Palmer, a massage-industry pioneer who believes in the intrinsic value of touch, whether or not it's "therapy." Palmer doesn't even use the T-word, referring instead to "massage practitioners." Like the people who built the first personal computers, he represents a special Bay Area blend of bohemian self-actualization and entrepreneurial drive. He, too, is a commercial and cultural innovator—as the inventor of the contemporary chair massage, Palmer is the man responsible for all those public shoulder rubs in airports and elsewhere.

In 1982, he was running a San Francisco massage school and worried that not enough graduates were finding jobs. If massage was so great, why didn't more people want it?

The answer was pretty obvious: everything about the experience scared off potential clients. "If you want to make sure massage didn't make it into the mainstream," Palmer says, "make it as expensive, inconvenient, and scary as possible. Force people to go into a private room behind closed doors, take off all their clothes with a stranger, lie down on a table, get slathered with oil for an hour, and pay $70, $80, $90 for the privilege."

Massage needed a form that was cheap, quick, convenient, and fully clothed. Palmer developed an acupressure-based routine, or *kata*, that took just fifteen minutes and was done while the client sat on a drummer's stool. Although a chair massage might cost more per minute than a table massage, the price for the experience was much lower. The next step was to create a special chair to support the client's head, arms, and legs.

"Once you have a massage chair," says Palmer, "then the massage industry thinks, Oh, this must be real." Once massage chairs start showing up everywhere, potential clients don't think of massage as a shady business. And more people decide that they, too, might want to give massages for a living.

One obstacle to the industry's growth is the fact that massage is labor intensive, the quintessential hands-on service. A massage entrepreneur can't automate the experience—those vibrating chairs are a lousy substitute for the real thing—and can't outsource the labor to low-wage foreigners (unless, of course, the price includes airfare and hotel accommodations). Giving an hour-long massage takes an hour of someone's time, and that someone has to be paid.

But one way to build a new industry is to create a more satisfying way to work. In today's affluent United States, people are remarkably willing to take lower wages, fewer benefits, and less security in exchange for less stress.

Less stress means flexible hours and enjoyable work, not a more reliable income. Massage pay is decent—doing twenty hours of actual massage a week, a practitioner will likely make $30,000 to $35,000 a year—but therapists get paid only if clients show up. For most massage therapists, having a fulfilling job seems to be worth the uncertainty.

David Palmer, the massage-chair inventor, says he not only wants "to make touch a social value" but also to make massage a source of meaningful work. "There is something seriously sad about a culture where people spend most of their waking lives doing something that doesn't have meaning—inherent, intrinsic meaning—for them," he says. He worries that massage still isn't popular enough to absorb the skyrocketing number of people who'd like to practice it: some 70,000 Americans

graduated from massage schools last year.

So Palmer and an ambitious young business partner, Sam Keller, are out to create the Starbucks of chair massage—to turn a fragmented, feel-good industry into a ubiquitous brand. Their new enterprise, Zubio, is all about creating consistent expectations, for both client and practitioner.

Instead of plopping down a massage chair in someone else's store or office, Zubio installs permanent, semi-private kiosks. It trains practitioners in its specific *kata* and pays them by the hour, plus tips and stock options (this is the Bay Area, after all). Clients make appointments either on the booth's touchscreen or via the Internet. One person can run the booth, concentrating on giving massages rather than handling appointments and paperwork. "It's high tech meets high touch," says Keller.

Zubio opened its first kiosk in December and rolled out a couple more in the spring. Whether America is ready for the Starbucks of massages—and whether Zubio is it—remains to be seen. But Palmer's dissatisfaction and determination have already changed the world. Twenty years ago, after all, no airport traveler looked for a chair massage. Especially in Indianapolis.

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